

# Legislative Assembly of Alberta



CANADIANA

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Fact Sheet No. 12

## The Speaker

Each day the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly open when the Sergeant-at-Arms calls "Order, order!" and leads a procession into the Chamber. Following the Sergeant-at-Arms is the Speaker, wearing the traditional parliamentary robes. The Speaker takes the Chair at the head of the Chamber and referees the Assembly's daily business.

Like all other MLAs, Speakers are first elected to the Assembly by one of the constituencies in the province. They are then elected to the Speaker's post by the other MLAs at the beginning of the first legislative session following a provincial election. Having accepted the position, Speakers do not belong to a party caucus; instead, they become servants of the whole Assembly. In this role they must be impartial and all Members of the Legislative Assembly must accept their authority.

### A Colourful Past

The Speakership has a long history, going back to the earliest Parliaments of Great Britain. The first person to be called "the Speaker" was Sir Thomas Hungerford in 1377. In those days the Speaker's job was to advise the king or queen of Parliament's resolutions. If these resolutions angered the monarch or threatened the monarchy's power, which they often did, the monarch sometimes took revenge by killing the Speaker. In parliamentary history at least nine Speakers died violent deaths for telling kings and queens news they didn't want to hear. Some historians even think that the original purpose of the opening procession was to provide Speakers with bodyguards to protect

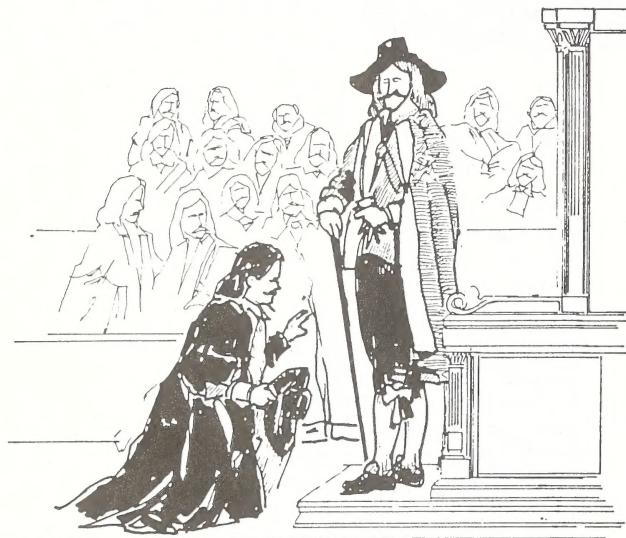
them from harm as they entered the Assembly Chamber.

Although early Speakers in Great Britain were the mouthpieces of Parliament, they were not always the servants of Parliament as they are now. In fact, the first Speakers were appointed by the monarch, not by Parliament. The Speaker's role changed along with the changing roles of Parliament and the British monarchy. Parliament first came into being because people resented being taxed and having no control over how the monarch spent their money. Gradually, over many centuries, monarchs turned over to Parliament, particularly the House of Commons, their power to levy taxes, spend tax dollars, and make laws.

During that shift of power, the Speaker's loyalty also shifted from the monarch to the House of Commons, although that change happened much more quickly. In 1629 King Charles I ordered Speaker Sir John Finch to adjourn a session of the House. When Speaker Finch rose to obey the king's order, angry Members of Parliament tried to force him to remain in the Chair, reminding him that he was supposed to be their servant, not the king's.

Speaker Finch and Charles I won that dispute and dissolved Parliament, but 13 years later, when Britain was on the verge of civil war, Charles barged into the Chamber and demanded the surrender of five members opposed to his policies. Speaker William Lenthall refused, saying, "I have neither eyes to see nor tongue to speak in this place but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here." He was telling the king in no uncertain terms that the Speaker served Parliament and

Parliament only. That moment was a turning point in the history of Parliament, for it established the Speaker's independence from the Crown. By the end of the 17th century the Speaker was an appointee of Parliament and not of the monarch.



"I have neither eyes to see . . ." Speaker Lenthall establishing the Speaker's independence from the Crown.

### Alberta's Speakers

In our modern parliamentary system the Premier and cabinet govern in the name of the monarch. Our Speakers are not appointed by the Premier and are not members of the cabinet. Instead, they must serve all MLAs equally, no matter what party they belong to. This means that in the Assembly Chamber:

- The Speaker ensures that all MLAs follow parliamentary rules as they ask or answer questions, debate, or vote.
- The Speaker gives all MLAs a fair chance to speak.
- The Speaker ensures that the special rights and privileges of members and of the Assembly as a whole are protected.
- The Speaker cannot take part in debate, ask or answer questions during Oral Question Period, or vote except to break a tie.

The Speaker is also the head of the Legislative Assembly Office, which provides a

range of services to all MLAs. These include office support for MLAs in their constituencies and at the Legislature, legal and procedural advice, and programs to help MLAs serve their constituents and do the Assembly's business efficiently (see Fact Sheet No. 6, The Legislative Assembly Office). As head of the LAO the Speaker also has the enjoyable task of receiving official guests of the province, such as ambassadors or consuls general, and seeing to their comfort while they are visiting Alberta.

Because the Speaker represents the Assembly, Members of the Legislative Assembly must show the Speaker the same respect they would show the Assembly as an institution. Therefore:

- Members cannot question the Speaker's rulings on matters of parliamentary procedure except by a formal motion of non-confidence. They may, however, ask for an explanation.
- When the Speaker rises for any reason, all members and anyone else in the Chamber must remain in their places until the Speaker is finished.
- Members may not interrupt the Speaker.
- All the words spoken in the Chamber are addressed to the Speaker, the Assembly's messenger to the Crown.

The key aspects of the Speakership are authority and impartiality. The Assembly grants the Speaker the authority to direct its debates and proceedings, and the Speaker does so without favouring MLAs from one political party over those from another. As the servant of the Assembly, the Speaker represents the whole Assembly.

#### Speakers of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Name	Dates
Hon. Charles W. Fisher	1906-19
Hon. Charles S. Pingle	1920-22
Hon. Oran L. McPherson	1922-26
Hon. George N. Johnston	1927-36
Hon. Nathan E. Tanner	1936-37
Hon. Peter Dawson	1937-63
Hon. Arthur J. Dixon	1963-72
Hon. Gerard J. Amerongen	1972-86
Hon. David J. Carter	1986-